

# Proposal to Change Flow of Missouri River Is Dropped

By Michael Grunwald  
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The Bush administration yesterday abandoned a controversial plan to propose major flow changes in the Missouri River, despite an earlier ruling by federal environmental officials that the changes are necessary to prevent the extinction of endangered fish and birds.

The Army Corps of Engineers had signaled for months that it would endorse increasing the Missouri's spring flows and reducing its summer flows to mimic its natural regime, and it had publicly acknowledged that its management of the river was violating the Endangered Species Act. But yesterday the agency reversed course, releasing its analysis of several possible plans for the river but declining to recommend the "spring rise."

The surprise move delighted the barge industry, farm interests and Sen. Christopher S. Bond (R-Mo.), who has crusaded against a spring rise for years.

But the decision outraged environmentalists, Fish and Wildlife Service officials and Senate Majority Leader Thomas A. Daschle (D-S.D.), whose long-running war with Bond over the river temporarily shut down last year's Senate budget process. Daschle lashed out at the Corps yesterday, saying the reversal highlighted the need for major reforms at the agency.

"I'm deeply disappointed," he said. "This turns the whole process on its head. The Corps is playing politics with the Missouri."

The Corps has been studying management changes for the river for 12 years, and the issue has become one of the most contentious in the Midwest.

Farmers worry that the ebb-and-flow plan would drown their fields in the springtime, and the few barge operators who still use the river warn that it would shut down navigation during summer. President Bush vowed to block a spring rise last year during a campaign trip to Missouri, but officials from the wildlife service and the Corps agreed at a December news conference that a spring rise was needed to save the river's pallid sturgeon, piping plovers and least terns. As recently as July 22, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported that the Corps was preparing to recommend a spring rise this month.

But yesterday, the Corps issued a draft analysis of the Missouri without recommending any "preferred alternative" for future management.

"This decision not to rig the outcome with a preferred alternative is good news for all of us who believe we can save fish, birds, the Missouri River and Missourians at the same time," Bond said.

The move is not unprecedented, but it is unusual, especially given the agreement by the Corps that the spring rise was necessary. "It looks like the Corps is throwing out 12 years of work," said Michael Olson, Fish and Wildlife's Missouri River coordinator. "So much for science."

Corps officials said they made a "corporate decision" to make no recommendation yesterday, and that they still might decide to implement a spring rise when they issue a final decision next summer.

But agency sources said they were poised to endorse the spring rise before administration officials overseeing the Corps intervened. As one official put it: "Things happen on the way to the church."